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# Strengthening the US Saudi Relationship: Senator Howard Baker Jr. and the AWACS

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Strengthening the US Saudi Relationship:  
Senator Howard Baker Jr. and the AWACS

Ediobong Ebiefung

May 8, 2014

## Introduction

In October of 2010 President Barack Obama formally notified Congress of his intent to conclude a large multilayered arms deal with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. With an estimated value of \$60 billion<sup>1</sup> over 10 years, the weapons package will be the biggest ever in the history of the United States. The first part of the deal, signed December 24, 2011 and valued at \$29.4 billion<sup>2</sup>, will give the Saudis 84 new F-15SA jets and upgrade 70 of their older F-15s. Furthermore, the Saudis will receive help with training, maintenance, and logistics. The planes will include the most technologically advanced air-to-air missiles along with precision-guided air-to-ground missiles as well. Congress approved the deal without much controversy, and the affair was not seen as a major turning point for the Obama Administration. Historically, making such deals with Saudi Arabia was not as easy, as evidenced by the events of 1981 when President Ronald Reagan sought to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. Valued at \$8.5 billion, roughly \$21.3 billion<sup>3</sup> when adjusted for inflation, that arms package was defined by the advanced and controversial AWACS aircraft. Convinced of the arms sales importance in securing the United States' strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, Ronald Reagan's cabinet secretaries believed that Congress would readily approve the sale. They severely miscalculated. As a result, the president had to call upon the help of the senior senator from Tennessee, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, Jr., to secure the deal in the Senate. This essay will examine Howard Baker's role in passing the AWACS deal by looking at his actions, chronologically, over the course of 1981.

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<sup>1</sup> Landler, Mark & Myers, Steven Lee. (2011, December 29). With \$30 Billion Arms Deal, U.S. Bolsters Saudi Ties: *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>2</sup> Landle & Myers

<sup>3</sup> Anand, Akina. (2010, November 6). The Real Reason For Obama's Trip To India: The Sixth Biggest Arms Deal In U.S. History. Retrieved from [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)

## Background

To best understand the significance of the AWACS deal and Senator Howard Baker's role in it, it is necessary to examine the whole affair through the historical context of US and Saudi relations. This is necessary because one of the strongest arguments for the sale was that, if it was not passed, it would deal irrevocable damage to the US-Saudi partnership. Subsequently, it is important to study US Middle Eastern policy, specifically US Saudi policy, prior to the AWACS arms package in 1981 to fully appreciate what was at stake when Baker and the president spoke of America's relationship with Saudi Arabia.

The relationship between the two countries was born out of the confluence of world war, corporate interests, oil, and the geopolitical realities of the post war order. Prior to World War II, many US policy makers did not consider Saudi Arabia a particularly significant country. Only after American oil companies discovered vast petroleum deposits in the eastern part of the country during the 1930s did policy makers begin to pay the region more attention<sup>4</sup>. This would be significant, as the oil companies came to have a great influence on US policy towards the desert monarchy. It was the petroleum industry that convinced President Roosevelt to make Saudi Arabia eligible for Lend-Lease aid during the war in consideration for wartime petroleum supplies.<sup>5</sup>

The rising importance of Saudi Arabia in American foreign policy considerations was further underscored by the fact that after the Yalta Conference, Roosevelt went out of his way to

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<sup>4</sup> Citino, Nathan J. (2002). *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ūd, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Citino

personally meet with Saudi King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud on his way back to the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of this meeting should not be underappreciated. The president wanted to discuss matters of energy and assistance. Wary of Imperialism, but also very interested in the US's intentions, he brought up the matter of Jewish immigrations to Palestine. The meeting left a considerable impression on the president, who promised his royal counterpart that US foreign policy in the Middle East would follow two central tenants: Roosevelt would only change policy in Palestine after full consultation with both Arabs and Jews, and the United States would never act in a hostile way towards the Arab people.<sup>7</sup>

Roosevelt would later die, leaving the less experienced Truman in power. As a result of Roosevelt's death in 1945, Truman cancelled a planned trip to the Middle East scheduled for that same year. After the end of the war, the need for air routes and oil supplies diminished, as did Saudi Arabia's priority status in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Three realities of the postwar situation determined how the new president viewed Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The first was the increasingly expansionist aims of the Soviet Union. This would come to shape President Truman's entire foreign policy focus. The Soviets began to dominate Eastern Europe, seemed poised to dominate Iran, challenged Turkish sovereignty on the Black Sea straits, and actively stoked insurrection in Greece. All of these events took place on the fringes of the Middle East, and the president and his administration felt that these moves were designed "to deny to Western Powers the strategic facilities available in the Near East..."<sup>9</sup> At this point Truman was fully committed to the idea of Containment. This, however, would fly in the face of the second

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<sup>6</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Bronson

<sup>8</sup> Bronson

<sup>9</sup> Bronson

postwar reality: weak congressional support for internationalism.<sup>10</sup> Many Republicans and some of the president's fellow Democrats were content with allowing the Soviet Union to pursue its own sphere of influence. However, many Democrats were staunchly internationalist. Later in 1947, the third reality—that of waning British influence—was realized when the UK government announced in February that it would forfeit its mandate in Palestine and would no longer help the Greeks and the Turks fight communism.<sup>11</sup>

The United States did not want the Soviet Union to step in and fill the vacuum left behind by the British, but also did not want to be seen as propping up the old colonial order. Mindful of its constraints, the Truman administration began to increase its role in the region. Saudi Arabia and the United States worked out a military agreement to have the US train Saudi troops. To get around Congress's isolationist and tightfisted tendencies, the State Department came up with creative ways to give financial aid to the Saudis. The largest of these was the "50/50 Agreement"<sup>12</sup>, which increased the Saudis share of the American oil company Aramaco's revenues. This was controversial because it reduced the revenue from taxes coming in to the US Treasury.

In the 1950s the Saudi government allowed the US to build an air base at Dhahran to protect Saudi oilfields and further contain the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia in return gave broad support to US policies in the region, except those regarding Israel.<sup>13</sup> When the US recognized that country's declaration of independence, the Saudis viewed it as a betrayal of Roosevelt's promise. US support for Israel and Saudi Arabia would be a difficult balancing act to maintain. By the end

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<sup>10</sup> Bronson

<sup>11</sup> Bronson

<sup>12</sup> Bronson

<sup>13</sup> Citino, Nathan J. (2002). *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ūd, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

of Truman's term in office, US-Saudi relations, which started under his predecessor, had been further Institutionalized. However, the incoming administration would inherit some problems: Congress's lack of willingness to give Saudi Arabia nonmilitary aid, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and the rise of anti-colonialism and Arab nationalism.

Newly elected President Eisenhower was worried about independent states turning towards the Soviet Union, and his administration assumed a decidedly anti-colonial position in international affairs. In tandem with this, the president gave American companies increased latitude to act for American interests abroad.<sup>14</sup> Both of these shifts would have interesting implications for US-Saudi relations. The Middle East was a big priority for the new administration. This was underscored by Secretary of State Dulles' going on a comprehensive Middle East tour shortly after taking office.

Eisenhower's new approach to international affairs would soon deal with its first issue when Britain and Saudi Arabia got into a territorial dispute over the oasis of Beraimi. The British claimed the area belonged to Oman and Abu Dhabi, protectorates of Great Britain.<sup>15</sup> The Saudis argued that the area had always been theirs. Aramco helped the Saudis build their case, and swayed the US to support them on the issue.<sup>16</sup> Things came to a head when, in 1953, the British forced the Saudis out of the area. Distrustful of Britain, this left the United States and Aramco as Saudi Arabia's main international partners.

The United States would soon again find itself with Saudi Arabia and against Britain due to Arab Nationalism and the Suez Crisis. In Egypt, Nasser had come to power and purported a new

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<sup>14</sup> Bonson

<sup>15</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Bronson

anticolonial ideology of Arab Nationalism. In doing so, he turned Egypt away from the West and towards the Soviet Union. He also nationalized the Suez Canal. Subsequently, Britain and France, together with Israel, took military action. During the crisis, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries embargoed Britain, France, and the United States. Not wanting to be seen as bolstering the colonial order, they resisted Anglo-French pleas for alleviation until a ceasefire was reached. To counter the appeal of Nasser, the Eisenhower Administration proposed in 1957 to “secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid, against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International communism.”<sup>17</sup>

This became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, and due to a reluctant Congress it was a “flop.”<sup>18</sup> The US looked to Saudi Arabia to offer an ideological alternative to Nasserism. However, a new king had ascended to the throne. This leadership transition, weak governance, and the tenuous domestic situation in the kingdom made this idea impossible. In the eyes of the new Kennedy administration, the new king was weak, and the US had to change strategy when dealing with Saudi Arabia. His administration sought to create ties with influential developing countries such as India and Egypt<sup>19</sup>, Saudi Arabia’s rival. These countries were seen as both nationalist and reforming. In the Middle East, monarchies represented the status quo, and king deposeders like Nasser offered something new and inspiring to the masses. The Kennedy administration wanted to be a part of that.

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<sup>17</sup> Archive, U.S. Department of State.(2009). The Eisenhower Doctrine, 1957. U.S. Department of State. Retrieved from <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/82548.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Bronson



Unsurprisingly, US-Saudi relations deteriorated. This deterioration was encouraged by three events. First, the newly elected president had sent a letter to King Saud, receiving a blistering response centered on American support for Israel. Kennedy was shocked and insulted. Second, fearful of anticolonial and Arab Nationalist sentiment, the Saudis rescinded an agreement to renew the lease for the American airbase in the country. Third and perhaps worst of all, King Saud sent officials to Moscow to explore the possibility of weapons sales and improved relations.<sup>20</sup> These issues, coupled with the kingdom's domestic instability during the early 1960s, caused the US to initially pivot away from Saudi Arabia during Kennedy's administration.

The United States refocused its attention on the kingdom in late 1962 after Egyptian backed Republican soldiers overthrew the Yemeni Imamate government. The deposed Imam al-Badr lead a Royalist revolt against the Republicans, and the situation soon became a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup> This brought increased US and Soviet interest. The Kennedy administration thought the best way to shore up the Saudi regime was not through military aid, but rather by inducing it towards "modernization and development."<sup>22</sup> Kennedy feared that the Saudis would waste resources in the conflict and leave themselves open to an anti-western coup. As the conflict in Yemen intensified, Egypt began to make incursions into Saudi territory. When the Egyptians refused to stop, Kennedy eventually authorized Operation Hard Surface, which called for the deployment of aircraft to Saudi Arabia with the intention of demonstrating "to the

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<sup>20</sup> Bronson

<sup>21</sup> Nazer, Fahad. (2013, September 20). Saudi Arabia's Proxy Wars. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/21/opinion/global/saudi-arabias-proxy-wars.html>

<sup>22</sup> Komer, Robert W. "Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy," October 4, 1965

Saudi and Egyptian governments and peoples continued U S interest in and support for Saudi Arabia and to provide a deterrent to Egyptian operations in Saudi airspace.”<sup>23</sup>

Egyptian activities in Yemen, coupled with the untimely death of Kennedy, led to a shift in US relations away from Egypt and solidly behind the Saudis. For the incoming Johnson Administration, this occurred in three areas. First, Johnson drastically reduced aid to Egypt. Second, Johnson stopped US insistence on economic and democratic reforms. Third, Johnson increased the role of arms deals in the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup> However, apart from these measures, Johnson put the Middle East on the backburner, as he was more concerned with the war in Southeast Asia. Political infighting continued in Saudi Arabia until Faisal deposed his brother and became king. Calm was restored to the Saudi political scene. The new king sought to counter Nasser and the Soviets through emphasizing Islam in Saudi foreign policy. Furthermore, he sought to build up the country’s military which benefited from America’s new interest in selling weapons.

Soon, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War broke out, and the United States and Britain were accused of supporting the Israelis. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia joined other Middle Eastern oil exporters by levying a petroleum embargo against the two countries. The Johnson White House understood the move to be for the Saudi domestic audience. The United States had the capacity to ride out the embargo. Furthermore, to allay US concerns, the kingdom quietly allowed aviation fuel to get to American units stationed in Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> The war put a strain on US-Saudi Relations, and the president focused on Vietnam for the rest of his tenure. The result of the conflict was a

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<sup>23</sup> Hart, Parker T. (1998). *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Birth of a Security Partnership*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Bronson

substantially diminished Egypt and a steadier US- Saudi partnership. This would continue on after the Johnson administration.

When he took office, President Richard Nixon was preoccupied with other matters and delegated policy on the Middle East to the State Department.<sup>26</sup> In the region, the United States threw its weight behind Saudi Arabia and Iran with a policy that became known as “Twin Pillars.”<sup>27</sup> Nixon soon centralized foreign policy matters by appointing Henry Kissinger to the dual roles of National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in 1973. During this time, the Saudi kingdom forged closer relations with Egypt and worked to pull it away from Soviet orbit. The Saudis also put pressure on the United States to resolve the territorial issues that arose from the 1967 and previous Arab-Israeli Wars. For the first time, the Saudis hinted at the possibility of using oil as a weapon.<sup>28</sup> As the territorial issues stagnated, Egypt and its allies decided to resolve the issue militarily, through a surprise attack against Israel starting the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As the United States openly supported Israel in the conflict, Saudi Arabia and other OPEC states initiated a crippling oil embargo against the West that pushed US-Saudi relations to their lowest point. The situation was so bad that there was even talk in some US policy circles of taking Saudi oilfields by force.<sup>29</sup> After a ceasefire was signed, the embargo still was not lifted until 1974, when the United States could show progress on Israeli-Egyptian disengagement. After the 1973 war, Saudi Arabia solidified its preeminent position in the Middle East.

After the embargo and subsequent quadrupling of oil prices, the Saudi government was flush with cash. Getting some of this money back to the United States became the focus of the

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<sup>26</sup> Bronson

<sup>27</sup> Bronson

<sup>28</sup> Bronson

<sup>29</sup> Bronson

incoming Ford administration. In order to do this, Kissinger had a strategy to convince Saudi Arabia to invest some of its newfound wealth in America. This would bind the two countries incredibly close, make Saudi Arabia invested in the economic wellbeing of the United States, and thus make Saudi Arabia unlikely to embargo the US again. The plan was a success, and the Saudi government invested billions of petrodollars in the US economy. In tandem, the US and its companies helped with industrial development and modernization efforts within the kingdom. The relationship was propelled to new heights.

The relationship also had a military dimension as the Saudi royals poured billions into the US arms industry. Military sales agreements “jumped from \$305 million in 1972 to more than \$5 billion in 1975.”<sup>30</sup> This had a tremendous positive impact on the US economy. Furthermore, after Nixon’s resignation, with a subsequently more assertive Congress, the Ford administration sought Saudi Arabia’s help in secretly funding anti-communist groups it could not due to congressional restrictions. The desert kingdom did this with gusto, while at the same time spreading its conservative Islamic message. Such clandestine anticommunist activities would continue on in future administrations, becoming a hallmark of the US-Saudi Cold War relationship.

In 1977 the Carter administration came in to office. The new president, like Kennedy, was more focused on engaging the newly industrializing countries than combating communism. President Carter soon began working with the Saudis on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In years prior, Saudi Arabia had adopted a more conciliatory approach towards Israel. This was out of a fear that the perceived antagonism towards the latter by the former was dangerous to US Saudi

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<sup>30</sup> Bronson

relations.<sup>31</sup> Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's surprise 1977 trip to Jerusalem caught most observers off guard and further pushed the peace process along. Grateful for Saudi cooperation and flexibility, President Carter promised to support a Saudi request for F-15 aircraft. In a preview of the next administration's fight over the AWACS, the proposal was bitterly opposed by Congress and the Israel lobby mobilized against it. With the help of key legislators such as Senator Howard Baker, the administration managed to circumvent a good deal of complaints by combining the package into a larger arms deal that included equipment for Israel and Egypt. This forced Congress to reject or approve the deal for all countries involved at the same time, and, in 1978, Congress approved it.

Relations between the US and Saudi Arabia would deteriorate after it became clear that Egypt would settle for a bilateral peace instead of linking it to the Palestinian issue at the Camp David talks. As a result, and to the great dismay of the United States, the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978 caused Saudi Arabia to cut the hundreds of millions of dollars of aid it gave to Egypt and lead the Arab world in isolating Egypt internationally.<sup>32</sup> The following year, 1979, would bring even more tension as Iran was caught in the grip of revolution and a two week long crisis engulfed Saudi Arabia when rebels took control of the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The situation in Iran deteriorated as the Shah, a strong supporter of the United States, was overthrown, and his Imperial State of Iran was replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran, a strongly inimical regime to the United States. The anti-US stance of the new government was further highlighted as students seized the US Embassy in Iran. Another threat emerged with the December 25 Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, which helped bring the Soviet Union to the

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<sup>31</sup> Bronson

<sup>32</sup> Bronson

doorstep of the Middle East. The situation in the region continued to get worse when, in late 1980, Iraq initiated a costly and bloody war with Iran.

When President Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981, the situation in the Middle East was bleak. The revolution in Iran had destroyed the twin pillar strategy, and the Soviets surrounded the region with positions in Afghanistan and Eastern Europe. This made Saudi Arabia essential all of the strategic objectives of the US in the region. Reagan sought not just containment of the Soviet Union but to “reverse the expansion of its control and military presence throughout the world.”<sup>33</sup> The new administration planned to make Saudi Arabia a partner in this new “Reagan Doctrine.” In the interests of furthering ties, the Reagan administration decided to sell sophisticated military and surveillance technology to the Saudis, the most technologically advanced being the AWACS. The role of this sale was to help protect the Saudi’s from Soviet designs. However, Congress was reluctant to work with the Kingdom, harboring suspicions of its intentions towards Israel and questioning its stability. This fundamental divergence of opinion between the White House and Congress would lead to the bruising legislative fight that was the AWACS vote.

## **The AWACS**

The Airborne Warning and Control System, abbreviated as AWACS, is a mobile long-range radar surveillance, control, and air defense system. It was developed by the United States Air Force and is mounted on a modified Boeing 707 aircraft. Its most notable visual feature is the large 30ft rotating dome fixed about the aircraft’s fuselage.<sup>34</sup> This is where the main radar

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<sup>33</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2004, July 9). The U.S.-Saudi Love Affair Predates Bush. Retrieved from <http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/us-saudi-love-affair-predates-bush/p7175>

<sup>34</sup> AWACS. (2014). In Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/45986/AWACS>

antenna is located. The most sophisticated air defense system of its day, the system can identify, detect, and track low-flying aircraft from 200 nautical miles away. It can also do the same for higher level targets at a greater distance. The system has the ability to track maritime movements and can operate in any weather conditions over any type of terrain.<sup>35</sup> The system also uses sophisticated communications technology that is secure from adversarial interception and difficult to jam.

The AWACS first became an issue in the US-Saudi relationship in March of 1978 when Jimmy Carter agreed to sell 60 F-15 Eagle fighter planes to Saudi Arabia. The Israel lobby and congressional opposition, cooperatively, made short work of this request, and it was defeated. As a result, Carter revised the proposal, modifying it in two ways. First, as mentioned previously, he linked the proposal to Egyptian and Israeli arms deals. Second, he placed restrictions on the weapons to assuage Israel and Congress. These included denying the Saudis auxiliary fuel tanks which would make the planes capable of reaching far distances, such as Israel, sidewinder missiles, which were sophisticated weapons that were capable of hitting enemy aircraft at all angles, AWACS, and "other systems that could increase the range or enhance the ground attack capability of the F-15."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the Saudi government was not even allowed to request the restricted items again. The royals were not pleased with the constraints, but nonetheless accepted them, and Congress passed the sale. Carter, however, did authorize an emergency deployment of two AWACS to Saudi Arabia in 1979, when war between North and South Yemen seemed likely to spill over into Saudi Arabia Middleton.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Northrop Grumman Electronic Systems. AWACS Surveillance Radar: The Eyes of the Eagle. Retrieved from <http://www.northropgrumman.com/Capabilities/AWACSAPY2/Documents/AWACS.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Posner, Gerald. (2005). *Secrets of the Kingdom*. New York, NY: Random House

<sup>37</sup> Middleton, Drew. (1980, October 1). Aid for Saudis: A Risk for US. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121064342?accountid=14766>

By 1980, the geopolitical situation in the Middle East would take a dramatic turn for the worse, and the Carter administration would begin to rethink its stance on the promises it made to Congress and the restrictions it put on Saudi weapon procurement. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia reneged on its agreement, asking the State Department for the banned weapons.<sup>38</sup> Carter himself believed that the new situation in the region underscored Saudi Arabia's need to be able to adequately defend itself and, by extension, the United States' interests in the region from potential Soviet advances. Subsequently, he was predisposed to sell. Congress, however, was adamantly opposed to it, having just received assurances not to long ago that such weapons would not be sold to Saudi Arabia. Several senators wrote letters to the president indicating their displeasure, and senatorial opposition, along with the election, prevented the president from moving forward on the issue. However, this did not stop Carter from deciding again to deploy AWACS to Saudi Arabia. This time four AWACS were sent with an expanded role to protect Saudi Arabia from surprise attack and watch events in the Gulf, in particular the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>39</sup> In both instances of AWACS deployment, the Americans retained control of the planes.

When Reagan came into office in January of 1981, Saudi Arabia continued to try to get the advanced weaponry it wanted. Furthermore, the royals considered its acquisition a test to see how committed the new president was to the US-Saudi relationship. As mentioned previously Reagan saw Saudi Arabia as key to his wider aims in the Middle East and sought greater ties with the kingdom. Reagan, like Carter before him, was favorably disposed to the Saudi request and soon announced that his first foreign policy initiative would be to sell additional F-15 fighter

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<sup>38</sup> Posner, Gerald. (2005). *Secrets of the Kingdom*. New York, NY: Random House

<sup>39</sup> Middleton, Drew. (1980, October 1). Aid for Saudis: A Risk for US. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121064342?accountid=14766>



jets to the House of Saud.<sup>40</sup> The Israeli lobby gathered opposition in Congress, but the White House would soon expand the proposal by adding the sought after fuel tanks and sidewinder missiles to the deal. To placate Congress and others who were concerned about how the sale could hurt Israel, Reagan also proposed to sell F-15s to Israel and make that country eligible for hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of military credits from the United States.<sup>41</sup> By April, as the president was in hospital recovering from a would be assassin's bullet, the arms deal had been expanded even further. This was the result of a National Security Council meeting on the matter that was intended to make a compromise. Rather, everything was approved, and the administration decided to sell the Saudis AWACS as well.<sup>42</sup> This brought the entire arms package to \$8.5 billion, which would make it the largest arms deal in US history at the time. Then, on April 21, 1981, President Ronald Regan approved the sale. In accordance with the 1976 amendments to the Arms Export Control Act, after formal submission of the plan, Congress could block the sale through the passage of a concurrent resolution of disapproval. Before this formal notification process had even been initiated, the battle over the AWACS sale had already begun, and Reagan would soon find himself in desperate need of legislative allies to help him win the fight. To this end, he turned to Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker.

### **1976 Amendments to the Arms Export Control Act**

This piece of legislation is why Senator Baker is central in the AWACS story. Normally the President of the United States has great latitude in conducting foreign policy. However, due to the 1976 amendments to the Arms Export Control Act, some of that authority was taken away.

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<sup>40</sup> Bronson, Rachel. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Posner, Gerald. (2005). *Secrets of the Kingdom*. New York, NY: Random House

<sup>42</sup> Posner

Since struck down by the Supreme Court, the 1976 amendments require that the president formally notify Congress of his intention to conduct major arms sales with a foreign country. Congress then has a 50 day period to consider the sale. This is broken up into 20 days of “Pre-notification” and a formal 30 day period. Congress also had the power to block any major arms sale, through the passage of concurrent resolutions of disapproval in both chambers. These resolutions could be passed with a simple majority. If the joint resolution was passed, it could not be subjected to a presidential veto.<sup>43</sup> The law, however, did have a provisional go ahead with the sale if he determines that is an issue of national security.

### **Senator Howard Baker, Jr.**

Crucial to the passing of the AWACS arms bill, and central to the narrative of this work, is the figure of Howard Baker. Subsequently, some biographical information on the senator is appropriate. Born November 15, 1925 in Huntsville, Tennessee, Howard Henry Baker Jr. was part of a politically active family. He would come to study engineering, before deciding to go to law school at the University of Tennessee and practicing law at his father’s firm in Huntsville. After his father, who was a sitting congressman, died of an untimely heart attack, Baker ran for the U.S. Senate in 1964 and lost. He tried again, winning in 1966. In the early years of his career, Baker gained the respect of his colleagues and was floated as a possible running mate to President Nixon. He would continue to be engaged in both international issues as well as those particularly pertinent to Tennessee, winning reelection in 1972 on an antibusing and Nixon loyalist platform. He shot to national prominence when he was nominated to be the vice-chairman of the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities. In this capacity he

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<sup>43</sup> Laham, Nicholas. (2002). *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia: The Reagan Administration and the Balancing of America’s Competing Interest in the Middle East*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers

displayed independence and fairness “emerging from a Democratic dominated show with his reputation sustainably enhanced.”<sup>44</sup> Afterwards, Baker remained a loyal ally of President Ford and was once again considered for a vice presidential bid. In 1977 he became the Senate Minority Leader under President Carter. In this capacity, he was involved in many important arms and foreign policy issues. He was often against Carter on issues such as troop reductions in the Pacific, or the president’s actions to gain a SALT-II Treaty. Regarding the latter, he was bitterly opposed, accusing the White House of Putting “The nation...in great peril...because [the diplomats] did a bad job negotiating this treaty.”<sup>45</sup> On the flipside, he also worked with and supported the president on difficult, domestically unpopular, international issues such as the Panama Canal Treaty. His support for the president in this situation was extremely unpopular among both Republicans and the general public. However, Senator Baker believed it to be in the national interest and helped President Carter get the votes necessary for the treaty’s ratification in the Senate. Baker’s bipartisan approach to foreign policy was further seen in his dealings with Carter on several Middle Eastern issues, many of which would serve as precursors to the AWACS vote.

As previously mentioned, when Carter tried to sell jets to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, many American Jewish organizations were not pleased. Furthermore, there was bipartisan opposition to the deal, with many Republicans believing this was a way to move Jewish voters away from Democrats. Baker, while a supporter of Israel, was also concerned about what the negative impacts might be for completely cancelling the deal. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were American allies and had demonstrated their support for the peace process. Subsequently, Baker took a more

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<sup>44</sup> Annis Jr., J. Lee. (2007). *Howard Baker: Conciliator in an Age of Crisis*. Knoxville, TN: Howard Baker Center.

<sup>45</sup> Annis

moderate position on the issue and helped to encourage Carter to give the Israelis more planes as part of the final deal.

Baker also invested time and effort in helping Carter get the votes necessary to lift the arms embargo on Turkey in 1978. Interestingly, the embargo was a Republican initiative instituted by President Ford in 1975. However, Baker believed that the Turkish bases played an important role in monitoring the Soviet border and that it did not help to hinder Turkey with the embargo. Baker considered his primary concern as “what [was] best for the United States, within the limitations of general...moral conduct.”<sup>46</sup> The embargo had been in place in response to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, and, despite the conflict having abated, many Greek Americans were fearful that Turkey and Greece might go to war. Further compounding the issue, many members of Congress reported having loyal Greek-American constituents and donors who had never asked anything of them before, except for on this this issue. The Democrats were split on the matter, and Baker was able to secure the votes of enough Republicans to let it pass, thus helping Carter out once again.

In 1978, he was up for reelection, and after retaining his seat, made a bid for the presidency in 1979. Early polls had him a “solid but distant third”<sup>47</sup> after Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford, the latter of whom was not in the race. The cornerstone of his campaign was his role in the SALT-II debate. He also remained active in Senate affairs, and hoped to see the treaty stalled, so that he could focus more on his campaign. George Bush would soon enter the race and prove to be a contender, especially among moderate voters Baker was trying to appeal to. He eventually dropped out the race, but still had positive things to say about the process. The presidential

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<sup>46</sup> Annis

<sup>47</sup> Annis

campaign process, he found, was “unrivaled in public life,” and his campaign’s end results were “Baker’s only regret.”<sup>48</sup>

Baker threw his support for Reagan, who would go on to win the convention. He would also support the nominee at campaign events and was touted by many to be a potential running mate. At this time, Howard Baker was no longer interested in the position and felt he would have more influence in the Senate.<sup>49</sup> He continued helping the campaign, with his primary role serving as a clarifier for Reagan’s misstatements. With Reagan’s landslide victory in November, some more right-wing Republican House members had hoped to get a more conservative member for the position of Majority Leader. However, Baker, with the support of Reagan, his old colleagues, and many new Senators, was able to easily get the position. In transitioning to his new leadership role, he promised he would help Reagan honor his election commitments and called on his colleagues, as well as Reagan, that, since they were in power, they had obligation “to perform.”<sup>50</sup> Entering 1981 Baker indicated he wanted it to be “Ronald Reagan’s year,” thus giving the president some flexibility to shape his first year, paving the way for the AWACS debate.<sup>51</sup>

Baker’s political style up until the AWACS sheds some light on how he would deal with the issue. President Carter, in handwritten letters to Baker, described the senator’s leadership on those previously mentioned foreign policy issues as “invaluable,” “very important,” and “crucial.”<sup>52</sup> Some of the president’s aides took the praise even further, anonymously claiming

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<sup>48</sup> Annis

<sup>49</sup> Annis

<sup>50</sup> Annis

<sup>51</sup> Annis

<sup>52</sup> Annis

that Baker was “one of the greatest bipartisan statesmen in recent decades.”<sup>53</sup> In these scenarios Baker was willing to put himself on the line to further what he perceived as the national interest, regardless of the partisan ramifications. This helps to explain why he would invest so much in the AWACS deal.

Also of note here is Baker’s attitude towards the office of the presidency. Baker believed in a strong presidency and that “presidential strength flows in part from congressional confidence in [the president’s] judgment.”<sup>54</sup> Subsequently, Baker tried to avoid needlessly frustrating Carter. During the Iran Hostage Crisis, Baker did not use the opportunity to attack Carter, rather he saw the situation as a time for the American people to rally behind the president and for him to demonstrate leadership.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, one sees Baker working closely with Carter, even when he fundamentally disagreed with him as on the SALT-II Treaty. In an interview with George Cranwell Montgomery, Baker’s legislative assistant for foreign affairs, Baker was quoted as saying that “when possible, his job was to support the president.”<sup>56</sup> “Possible” refers to times when, in Baker’s judgment, supporting the president also furthers the national interest. When examining Baker’s political style, three fundamental pillars emerge: party loyalty, respect for the president, and working towards the national interest. In the case of the AWACS all of these three issues would coalesce and help explain the motivations of the Senate Majority Leader over the duration of the debate.

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<sup>53</sup> Annis

<sup>54</sup> Annis

<sup>55</sup> Annis

<sup>56</sup> Ebiefung, Ediobong, (Interviewer), Jones, Olivia (Interviewer) & Perice, Carl (Interviewer) Montgomery, Cranwell (Interviewee). (2014). Baker Center Archives.

## Baker and the AWACS

In order to best understand Senator Howard Baker's role in helping the president get the AWACS sale passed in the Senate, it is best to examine events chronologically using the major US newspapers. From here, the emphasis will be placed on highlighting Baker's role over the course of the debate and examining his contribution to the AWACS deal going through. Coverage starts in early April 1981, when the Regan administration informally announced its intention to sell the AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia.

Things started off badly on April 18, 1981, as the Saudis rejected administration requests to possibly postpone the deal or split the package. The Saudis also emphasized the rigidity of their position, and said they considered the "fulfillment of the Administration's commitment to sell the five electronic surveillance planes as a test of Saudi-American friendship."<sup>57</sup> Regan then decided that he would wait to hear Baker's report before taking further action.

Earlier that week, on April 12, Howard Baker led a Congressional delegation to the kingdom. He and his colleagues received a rough welcome as the US Embassy staff had difficulty even arranging a meeting with King Khalid.<sup>58</sup> Many analysts attributed this to Saudi lack of appreciation of the legislative process. Several members of the delegation believed Secretary Haig exaggerated his ability to get the deal through. Senator Baker sought to make these issues clear to the Saudis, discuss Palestine, discuss the Soviet threat, show his sympathy towards the package, and express congressional concerns regarding Israel while at the same time. This was

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<sup>57</sup> Gwertzman, Bernard. (1981, April 19). SAUDIS REBUFF U.S. ON POSTPONING DEAL FOR 5 RADAR PLANES. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121455358?accountid=14766>

<sup>58</sup> Cody, Edward. (1981, Oct 02). Cultural Blindness. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147305044?accountid=14766>

“[taking] the heat and [draining] some of the fever” from the impending debate.<sup>59</sup> When asked directly about his support for the deal, he declined to say whether he was for or against it. Baker seemed ambivalent regarding the deal, saying the administration would have a very “difficult fight” and that he could not predict the outcome.<sup>60</sup> He did emphasize the possibility of seeking variations on the deal, making it more palpable to members of Congress, and said he was urging the administration to allow significant “input by Congress” on the final package.

Although Baker was reported to have left Saudi Arabia feeling “lukewarm” about the deal, his early actions are important for two key reasons. First, the beginnings of a close working relationship with President Reagan can be seen. As mentioned before, the president wanted to hear from Baker before he decided where to go with the package. Second, during the meeting with the Saudis, Baker proposed several ideas that would come to dominate the AWACS debate down the road, including the idea of joint manning of the AWACS and intelligence sharing.<sup>61</sup>

After Baker’s return, the president decided to go ahead and push for the sale on April 22. He did this informally, as he still sought to consult with Senator Baker and other congressional leaders. Timing was a major issue, as Congress would have 30 days to vote on the measure, and an intense fight was already predicted. Regarding the president’s timeline, the majority leader had a very influential role in setting it and was able to convince Reagan to delay the arms deal until Congress had the chance to have some say in the final form of the weapons package.

Reagan announced the delay on April 27. Many analysts believe the president also sought to

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<sup>59</sup> Martin, Paul. (1981, Apr 13). Baker Meets with Saudis on Proposed Arms Sale. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147332854?accountid=14766>

<sup>60</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Apr 23). Administration Seeks to Reassure Israel on Proposed Sale of Weapons to Saudis. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147304241?accountid=14766>

<sup>61</sup> Martin, Paul. (1981, Apr 13). Baker Meets with Saudis on Proposed Arms Sale. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147332854?accountid=14766>



avoid influencing the outcome of Israeli elections. Speaking on the matter to CBS' "Face the Nation", Howard Baker spoke of how he suggested to Reagan that he delay the deal the day after he had announced his intention to go through with it, stating that "[He] was happy to say that the president agreed to that request."<sup>62</sup> More specifically, Baker spoke of how "[he] advised him the program would have difficulties in Congress, and strongly urged the administration to give members of Congress the opportunity to have an input— to offer advice on the final shape and form of the package that might be submitted."<sup>63</sup> He stressed that he expected Congress to have a lot of input in this process and estimated that this would delay the proposal to "late this year, certainly this fall." Baker also expressed his belief that he doubted a revised arms deal would include all of the components the Saudis wanted. This postponement limited earnest discussion of the issue until August.

In this first phase of action and discussions regarding the AWACS, one can see the influential role Baker played behind the scenes. Interestingly enough, at this stage, Baker's actions seem to stem more from a sense of party and institutional loyalty than from any strong opinions on the arms deal itself. This seems to be the case because, as of yet, Senator Baker had not formally given his support for the deal. Rather, all he had done was advise Reagan on how to proceed while at the same time acquiring guarantees that Congress would play some role in the final shape of the deal. This course of actions is fully in line with Baker's general political style of party loyalty balanced with actions deemed to be in the national interest. Examples of this would be Baker's reelection platforms, which always expressed support for the Republican incumbent president. Thus, Baker's early involvement with Reagan on the AWACS issue can be viewed as

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, Warren. (1981, Apr 27). Baker says U.S. to Delay AWACS Sale. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147335807?accountid=14766>

<sup>63</sup> Brown

that of a loyal Republican Senate Majority Leader going out of his way to help a Republican president pass his agenda while, at the same time, ensuring that Congress gets to influence the end result.

By August the intense debate on the AWACS began anew, with President Reagan seeking to set the agenda early on. Late in June, 54 Senators and 224 Representatives signed letters to Reagan opposing the proposed sale and requesting that he not even submit it to Congress.<sup>64</sup> In response, Reagan penned a letter of his own and sent it to congressional leaders: Howard Baker, his Democratic counterpart Robert Byrd (W. Va), House Speaker Tip O'Neil (D- Mass.), and House Republican leader Robert Michel (Ill.).<sup>65</sup> In the letter he stated his awareness "that information from a variety of sources has been circulating on Capitol Hill regarding this sale and that many members have been under some pressure to take an early position against it. I hope that no one will prejudge our proposal before it is presented."<sup>66</sup> The letter also spoke of how the sale would protect Saudi Arabia and "make it clear" to everyone that "the United States is determined to assist in preserving security and stability in southwest Asia."<sup>67</sup> In reaffirming his commitment for the deal, many believe the letter was a sign to the Saudis, along with members of Congress, showing the president's commitment, despite mounting odds. A lot of disagreement was coming from within the president's own party, as Rep., Jack Kemp (R-NY),

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<sup>64</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Aug 06). Reagan Letter to Congress Chiefs Reaffirms Sale of Awacs to Saudis. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121752323?accountid=14766>

<sup>65</sup> Lescaze, Lee. (1981, Aug 06). Reagan Launches Blitz for Saudi AWACS. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)* Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147331881?accountid=14766>

<sup>66</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Aug 06). Reagan Letter to Congress Chiefs Reaffirms Sale of Awacs to Saudis. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121752323?accountid=14766>

<sup>67</sup> Mohr

organized a colloquy where speakers excoriated the proposed deal. A number conservative Republicans in the Senate did express concern over the deal.<sup>68</sup>

The controversy continued when, on August 23, the administration conceded that, in the proposed deal, the US government would have no explicit or legal control over the use of the AWAS. Furthermore, the Saudi government had not agreed to restrictions on the planes if they were sold to them.<sup>69</sup> Administration officials contended that such requirements would belittle Saudi dignity and sovereignty. However, they added that potential threats to Israel would be limited because the United States would “assert a high degree of control” over the planes, due to necessary maintenance and technical support. President Reagan also announced that he would give formal written notification to Congress, regarding the sale. Subsequently, when Congress reconvened on September 9, 1981, they would have an informal notification period of 20 days. This is followed by a 30 day formal review period, giving Congress until October 30 to decide on the issue. White House aides also said that their strategy to get the deal through would be to defeat the resolution of disapproval in the Senate, so that it would not even become an issue in the Democrat controlled House.

On August 25, 1981, in a news conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Howard Baker officially threw his support behind Reagan by coming out in favor of the proposed sale, stating “I am satisfied that the proposed sale is in the interests of the United States.”<sup>70</sup> He went on to say, “It will allow the Saudis to provide a measure of their own defense while preserving for the United States an enhanced political and military role in regional security.” As he said this,

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<sup>68</sup> Lescaze, Lee. (1981, Aug 06). Reagan Launches Blitz for Saudi AWACS. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147331881?accountid=14766>

<sup>69</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Aug 23). U.S. AIDES CONCEDE SAUDIS BAR LIMITS ON USE OF AWACS. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121723811?accountid=14766>

<sup>70</sup> Senator Baker Endorses Proposed Saudi Deal. (1981, Aug 26). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121461671?accountid=14766>

several prominent members of Congress announced their strong disagreement with Baker's position. Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI), the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, said he would co-sponsor a resolution of disapproval for the sale of the AWACS when Congress reconvened on September 9. He cited fears of a Middle Eastern arms race as the main cause for his disagreement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), the ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, along with Senators Gary Hart (D-CO) and Carl Levin (D-MI), also expressed his opposition. In a bipartisan effort, over 200 House members were already on the record as being opposed and 54 Senators, led by Robert Packwood (R-OR), had already asked President Reagan not to go through with the sale.

Baker's move here is interesting, especially in the context of his political style. Evidence points to the fact that he had made up his mind earlier and was just waiting until now to let his views be made clear. According to Cranwell Montgomery, Baker believed he would have a better time convincing his colleagues of something if they believed he had taken sometime to be convinced himself.<sup>71</sup> Mr. Montgomery described how Baker had used the same technique during the Panama Canal Treaty debate. If Baker had made up his mind about the deal much earlier, this would help to explain his careful word choice up to this point. Instead of criticizing the deal, he mentioned things about how it might be difficult to get it through Congress or how it might be wise of the administration to consult with Congress first. These kinds of statements could only help bolster his credibility with his colleagues, as he would soon try to bring them over to his position. The positive impact of waiting was exemplified by the fact that Baker could now begin actively campaigning for the deal when it was much closer to the vote, as if he too had just

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<sup>71</sup> Ebiefung, Ediobong, (Interviewer), Jones, Olivia (Interviewer) & Perice, Carl (Interviewer) Montgomery, Cranwell (Interviewee). (2014). Baker Center Archives.

recently come around. Thus by waiting to reveal his position, he made himself a much stronger asset for Reagan than had he come out earlier.

On September 14, almost a week after Congress returned, President Ronald Reagan launched an intense lobbying effort to try to sway key Senators, inviting 27 of them to the White House to hear his arguments. Baker was also among them. After the meeting, many Senators emphasized that the president was aware that the vote would be a difficult one. Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev), a Reagan loyalist, commented “I’d say we don’t have the votes to sustain the sale. It’s going to be a tough fight.”<sup>72</sup> The president only spoke generally about the need for the sale, promising more specific details in future briefings and meetings.

Senator Baker had already taken initiative on the matter and, on the same day, his office sent out a memorandum to all of the Foreign Policy Legislative Assistants.<sup>73</sup> The memo announced that his office was hosting an AWACS briefing, in 3 days, that was to be “technical in nature “and from Air Force Staff. Defense/ISA staff was to be also present to explain the policy aspects of the sale. This sort of lobbying is important because Foreign Policy Legislative Assistants are the people in charge of foreign policy issues for any given congressperson. They also regularly give briefings to their legislator, and, thus, can keep them informed on some of the more technical aspects of the sale. While promoting efforts such as this, Baker was also engaged to direct talks with other Senators, specifically the undecided Robert C. Byrd (D-WV).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Sep 15). Reagan Lobbies 27 Senators on Sale of AWACS to Saudi Arabia. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147260036?accountid=14766>

<sup>73</sup> Office of the Majority Leader. (1981 Sep 14). “Memorandum to Foreign Policy LA’s.” *Baker Center Archives*

<sup>74</sup> Clines, F. X. (1981, Sep 14). WASHINGTON TALK. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121829734?accountid=14766>

Baker also was very involved with the Saudis and developed a close personal relationship with Saudi Arabia's chief negotiator Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Earlier, on September 2, the prince flew, with Undersecretary of States James Buckley, to Huntsville to meet with Baker and discuss the deal. At this meeting, it was proposed to Prince Bandar that Saudi Arabia should give some assurances about the use of the AWACS to assuage Israeli security concerns. Also, Baker spoke of the need to get prominent Democrats such as Minority Leader Byrd (D-W. Va), John Glenn (Ohio), or Sam Nunn (Ga). This would make the sale a less partisan issue.<sup>75</sup>

Later, on September 16, Prince Bandar requested a meeting with him to discuss the apprehension the prince was feeling regarding the language the State Department was using to describe the deal. Specifically, he was worried that Undersecretary Buckley, by emphasizing the notion of gaining assurances from Saudi Arabia, was weakening any dramatic impact that any Saudi assurances may otherwise have on the debate. Also he was worried that such talk created the implication that "something more can be obtained from the Saudis." Bandar also recommended that Baker be the one to break news of the assurances if anything were to happen.<sup>76</sup> During the month of September, Baker was in close contact with Prince Bandar, who indicated his willingness to broach the idea of joint US-Saudi control of the AWACS to his government.

In a September 23 memorandum between Baker and Cranwell Montgomery, his legislative aid, Montgomery responds to Baker's inquiries as to what it would take for the Senate to vote in favor of the AWACS with a series of proposals. The first was that "the major effort should be directed at persuading the requisite number of Senators that the President is personally and

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<sup>75</sup> Lescaze, Lee. (1981, Oct 30). President, Hill Allies Make 'a Nice Save'. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147279225?accountid=14766>

<sup>76</sup> Montgomery, Cran.(1981, Sep 16). "Memorandum to Senator Baker." *Baker Center Archives*

deeply committed to the proposal.”<sup>77</sup> This, he goes on to say, “will require a dramatic and extraordinary effort by the President.” Lastly, he recommended that Baker suggest to Reagan that he offer the Senate a letter guaranteeing that the sale will not be concluded until a signed Saudi agreement “on appropriate diplomatic correspondence to each of the assurances,” was received.

At this stage it became clear that Baker was more than just another vote for Reagan on the AWACS, but rather an essential and key player in the whole affair. The Saudis considered him one of the main people to influence events, and he was assisting Reagan in his lobbying efforts both directly and indirectly. This notion is made all the more accurate when it was revealed on September 25 that the administration had asked Baker to find a way for Reagan, tentative on Saudi approval, to back away from claims that no changes could be made to the deal. This was a bid by Reagan to try and sway the Senators still on the fence, particularly John D. Glenn (D-OH). In trying to find this compromise, Baker, Prince Bandar and administration officials met regularly.<sup>78</sup> Baker also moved back and forth between the White House and Capitol Hill. Senator Glenn was also invited to discussions with Prince Bandar. People close to the discussions said that Bandar was told that the only way the deal would be able to get through was by his government giving up absolute control over the AWACS. Instead Saudi Arabia was offered joint manning of the plans with American technicians.

The next day, on September 25, 1981, it was reported that the Saudis rejected the joint control compromise proposal that Baker and others worked on last week. The Saudis felt that having them “agree in writing to a guarantee” would not only be an affront to their sovereignty, but also

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<sup>77</sup> Montgomery, Cran.(1981, Sep 23). “Memorandum to Senator Baker.” *Baker Center Archives*

<sup>78</sup> John Goshko. (1981, Sep 25). Saudis told U.S. must crew AWACS. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147270951?accountid=14766>

undermine their position in the Arab world.<sup>79</sup> President Reagan lashed out at Senators against the deal stating, that “They are literally doing away with our ability to continue to try to bring peace to the Middle East.”<sup>80</sup> These strong remarks were reportedly indicative of Reagan’s disappointment in Baker’s assessment that “there was little, if any, chance that the Senate would agree to the Saudi arms sale unless some changes were made in it,”<sup>81</sup> Reagan had not given up on the issue, however, and also stated, “We’re trying to find out if there is anything that can persuade these people, without in anyway presuming on the good will of the Saudi Arabians...see common sense on this.”<sup>82</sup> By the end of the month, intense negotiations were being held in Saudi Arabia between US Ambassador Richard W. Murphy and members of the Saudi government including Prince Bandar who had flown back for the discussions. Stateside, there were increasing calls for, and hints of, the possibility of the White House delaying formal notification of the deal to Congress<sup>83</sup> Senator Moynihan (D-NY) was a strong proponent of delay.

In the end, the President postponed the formal notification of the sale one day until October 1. It was unclear, however, if new concessions or guarantees had been obtained from Saudi Arabia. When asked about the matter on September 30, Baker admitted “We don’t have enough votes,” but “it’s not beyond salvaging.”<sup>84</sup> With the formal notification made, the Administration went on the offensive to try and aggressively woo the unconvinced Senators. To this end Reagan got a great deal of help from 16 foreign policy officials from previous administrations, including the

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<sup>79</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Sep 26). Saudis Are Said to Reject Sharing Awacs Control with U.S. into 90's. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121801757?accountid=14766>

<sup>80</sup> Mohr

<sup>81</sup> Mohr

<sup>82</sup> Mohr

<sup>83</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Sep 30). Some Reagan Aides Predict Delay on Awacs. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121816286?accountid=14766>

<sup>84</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 01). Reagan Abruptly Postpones Sending AWACS Sale to Hill. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147142415?accountid=14766>



likes of Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara, each of whom publically supported the AWACS sale. On October 6, the officials, 13 of them, joined the president for a luncheon on the matter where they again emphasized how the deal was good for America's security.<sup>85</sup>

Howard Baker emphasized the necessity of personal lobbying efforts for the sale by Reagan. He told the media of Reagan's intention to speak with all the Republican senators that later day in a bid to convince them stating, "I think the president can and will make a personal appeal."<sup>86</sup> Senator Orrin G. Hatch (R-UT) was swayed by one such meeting afterwards announcing that he would support the arms sale. At this stage the focus was on the Republican Senators, specifically 20 whom it was thought might be able to be moved.<sup>87</sup>

Baker was also involved and was present at several such White House meetings, contributing his part to try and influence the minds of his colleagues. In a copy of Baker's talking points for a White House meeting scheduled October 7, 1981, one where all Republican Senators were invited, he began by emphasizing with his fellow Republican senators. He states, "I know the pressure that you are going through. I was in the same position in 1978 and I made the decision at that time to support the president in the development of bipartisan foreign policy."<sup>88</sup> In appealing to 1978 Baker is referring to his support for Jimmy Carter's controversial decision to sell fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. He goes on to say "we as Republicans can do no less for this president,"<sup>89</sup> appealing to notions of party loyalty. The memo then went on to describe how He had convinced Reagan to delay the sale so that he could get congressional input and how because

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<sup>85</sup> Goshko, John M., and Lescaze, Lee. (1981, Oct 06). Reagan Rallies Bipartisan Support on AWACS as Haig Cautions Senate. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147328533?accountid=14766>

<sup>86</sup> Goshko

<sup>87</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Oct 07). HOUSE UNIT DELAYS A KEY AWACS VOTE. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121675086?accountid=14766> Memo

<sup>88</sup> Baker, Howard.(1981, Oct 07). "Talking Pts. WH. Meeting 10/7/18 AWACS." Baker Center Archives

<sup>89</sup> Baker

of that “we have assurances from the Saudis on this package greater than we have ever obtained from any other country, or any other arms sale.”<sup>90</sup> This notion of assurances is very important as Senator Hatch claimed that President Reagan’s “top secret assurances” are what convinced him to join the pro-AWACS camp.<sup>91</sup> Baker’s approach is less aggressive than Reagan’s, and certainly much less so than Secretary Haig, both of whom apportion blame for the consequences of going against the deal. This potential ‘good cop, bad cop’ scenario, however, is perhaps more indicative of Baker’s political style than as an administration strategy to woo the Senate.

Taking a step back to October 6, 1981 President Anwar el-Sadat was assassinated. This would have a chilling effect on Congress and resulted in the House Foreign Affairs Committee postponing its vote on a resolution of disapproval regarding the AWACS sale. Baker was in favor of this and also encouraged Congress to “place a moratorium” on the deal. The recently converted Hatch came out strongly in support of the deal and saying “If there’s ever a time to support the President of the United States this is the time.”<sup>92</sup> Sadat’s death, however, served to harden Senators like John Glen (D-OH) who claimed the assassination showed how volatile the region was and stressed the dangers selling advanced military technology. Also Senators Sam Nunn (D-GA) and John Warner (R-VG) proposed a “sense of the Senate resolution” to try and get opponents of the sale on board. Senator Frank H. Murkowski (R-AK) went on the record for being against the sale.

On October 12, the Republican House leader Representative Robert Michel (R-IL) stated that without question the resolution of disapproval would pass in the House leaving all hope to the

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<sup>90</sup> Baker

<sup>91</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Oct 07). HOUSE UNIT DELAYS A KEY AWACS VOTE. New York Times (1923-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121675086?accountid=14766> Memo

<sup>92</sup> Mohr

Senate. The text of the Nunn-Warner “sense of the Senate” resolution was revealed and it called for AWACS technology only to be given to countries when certain “terms and conditions” are met.<sup>93</sup> Senator Nunn also said in a speech that he had received assurances that Reagan would follow through in writing with the Saudis. Furthermore, Senator Baker suggested that he would bring the arms sale to floor debate on October 20. Due to Senate rules that limit the debate to 20 hours, with equal time for both sides, the vote itself is likely to take place on October 21. This would give the administration roughly a week to secure the Senate.

On the October 14, the House voted against the AWACS sale, passing a resolution of disapproval by an overwhelming 301 to 111 margin. While the House was controlled by Democrats, 108 Republicans also voted for the resolution. In what was believed to be an attempt to buy time, Baker also announced he would postpone the senate vote on the resolution. An aid to the Majority Leader said this deferral was due to Reagan’s planned trip to an economic summit in Mexico.<sup>94</sup> Prince Fahd was also to be in attendance and there was speculation that the two might make a move that would influence the AWACS vote. The president also invited several senators to the White House to hear him out. Ted Stevens (R-AK), Mack Mattingly (R-GA), and Dan Quayle (R-IN) were convinced. Other senators who visited the White House, William S. Cohen (R-ME), David Pryor (D-AR) and Ernest Hollings (D-SC), were not convinced.<sup>95</sup> In a last ditch attempt the administration drafted a letter that would address the security concerns and issues of control regarding the sale. The outline of the proposed letter is what Quayle and Mattingly claimed made them change their stance.

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<sup>93</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Oct 13). Reagan Has a Week Left to Sway Congress on Awacs. *New York Times (1923 - Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121771114?accountid=14766>

<sup>94</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 15). Saudi AWACS Sale Defeated in House by 301-111 Vote. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147280899?accountid=14766>

<sup>95</sup> Goshko

The existence of a letter outlining Saudi assurances in tandem with the president's intense lobbying efforts was a signal that the administration was considering, if not following to a large extent, Baker's advice as received by Cranwell Montgomery in the September memorandum. As advised in the memo, Reagan made personal appeals to senators, inviting them to the White House for meetings. Also, Reagan began drafting the outline of a letter to reassure the Senate. While Senator Nunn recounted suggesting to Reagan that he "put into writing a series of commitments designed to overcome senators' objections to the sale," it would not be illogical to assume Reagan was influenced by Baker's ideas as well in drafting the letter. The use of such tactics was most likely a response to the failed attempts to extract more concessions from the Saudis.

On October 15, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 9 to 8 against the AWACS. The administration saw the narrowness of the vote as a significant boost to its hopes. The closeness of the vote, however, was due to the joint efforts of Howard Baker and President Reagan in convincing Senator Larry Pressler (R-SD) to change his mind at the last minute. While Pressler was in the committee debate preceding the vote, Howard Baker arranged for Ronald Reagan, who was in Philadelphia, to call Pressler. On the phone Reagan stressed that the sale had to go through if he was to be "a credible leader in foreign policy."<sup>96</sup> Pressler claimed he had not made his decision until that call.

Reagan continued his work, going all out calling and trying to meet with Senators to convince them to support the deal. The discussions got heated, with Senator John Glenn accusing the administration of resorting to "political bribery" to get the deal passed. Also in a bid to garner

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<sup>96</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 16). Senate Unit Votes No On AWACS. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147294088?accountid=14766>

momentum, the White House “orchestrated a series of support by Senators” who were already believed to be strongly in favor of the sale. Reagan also tried to make use of the his announced letter which is believed to promise that he will attain written guarantees before the AWACS are actually sold to Saudi Arabia.<sup>97</sup>

By October 23, Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) had come out against the sale bringing the total number of senators publically on the record against the sale to 50. Regarding this Baker remarked that since the opponents lack a firm majority the sale “is not dead...and you mustn’t write it off yet.”<sup>98</sup> Sources close to Baker indicated that he “privately concedes that the administration is way behind” and that now he would be “satisfied to see a 50-to-50 vote.” Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R-NH) came out in support of the sale which brings the proponent camp to 40.

The next day on October 24, proponents of the AWACS deal suffered a major setback when Arkansas Democrat Dale Bumpers (D-AR) announced that he was against the sale. Bumpers had been the target of intense lobbying efforts by the president, including a personal call from Cancun, Mexico.<sup>99</sup> It had been hoped that if Bumpers could be won over, other southern Democrats might be able to join the administration in support of the deal. The efforts to woo the southern Democrats were severely dampened by Bumpers’ no vote which came on top of Minority Leader Robert Byrd’s earlier expressed opposition to the sale in a dramatic speech on the floor of the Senate last week. While Baker could not convince Byrd, the Minority Leader did

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<sup>97</sup> By, C. M. (1981, Oct 18). White House Is Keeping Awacs Alive by All Means. *New York Times* (1923-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121716797?accountid=14766>

<sup>98</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 23). President Wins One, Loses One as His AWACS Lobbying Falts. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147309154?accountid=14766>

<sup>99</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 24). Bumpers Deals Severe Blow to Sale of AWACS. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147264563?accountid=14766>

acknowledge that the sale should not be a partisan issue. Mark O. Hatfield (R-OR) also indicated that he would vote against the \$8.5 billion sale bringing the number of senators on the record against the sale to 52. Howard Baker, however, claimed the sale “is still eminently winnable.”<sup>100</sup> Opponents of the sale, showing signs of increasing confidence, have called for Reagan to withdraw the package entirely. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) argued that withdrawing the package “would avoid a defeat for the president and a defeat for Saudi Arabia.”<sup>101</sup> Baker told the media that he has not discussed the idea of withdrawing the arms package with the president, but for the first time indicated that he would warn Reagan if defeat seemed imminent next week.<sup>102</sup>

Returning from his trip to Mexico, President Reagan ratcheted up the pressure, telling reporters that senators who do not understand the significance of the deal for both Israeli and American security “are not doing their country a service.”<sup>103</sup> He also stated that he had no considerations for withdrawing the \$8.5 billion arms package. Reagan also did not raise the issue of the AWACS with the Saudi prince. At the same time, Baker made an interesting claim to CBS News that he had personal promises from at least four senators publicly on the record against the sale who would switch their votes at the last minute. Reagan continued his lobbying efforts, inviting eight senators to join him at the White House on the 26. Speaking to CBS’ “Face the Nation” Baker stressed that the president did not try to renegotiate with the Saudi Crown Prince in Mexico, the package was not going to be modified and that Reagan was going to emphasize the same points the administration had been using previously.

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<sup>100</sup> Goshko

<sup>101</sup> Goshko

<sup>102</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Oct 24). Two More Senators Planning to Oppose Awacs Sale to Saudis. *New York Times* (1923-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121704129?accountid=14766>

<sup>103</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 25). President Raps AWACS Foes' Patriotism. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147219617?accountid=14766>

On October 26, Senator William L. Armstrong (R-CO) indicated that Reagan had convinced him to support the sale. The rest remained against the deal or undecided.<sup>104</sup> Despite the seeming ineffectiveness of the president's efforts, Baker continued to insist that senators would change their minds at the last minute. Reagan continued on his intense lobbying campaign, planning to see 12 senators later that day and on October 27. As things moved into high gear, the administration, however, refused to reveal the names of senators who it was targeting.<sup>105</sup> As it stood 53 senators were publicly on the record against the sale with only 38 for it.

The next day, on October 27, Baker and the administration's lobbying attempts paid their biggest dividend to date with nine senators publicly throwing their support to the sale.<sup>106</sup> Most dramatically, Senator Roger Jepsen (R-IA), who was a vocal critic of the arms package, switched to a supporter. Of the nine who gave their support, eight were undecided and one, Jepsen, switched. Senator Jepsen tied his change of heart to "highly classified information" given to him by Reagan that eased his anxiety over potential misuse of the AWACS.<sup>107</sup> At this stage 52 senators were on the record as opposing the sale with 47 for it. Only one senator, Russell B. Long (D-LA), had not made indications of support either way.

The day of the vote, October 28, Howard Baker made his last floor statement in support of the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia. He began by talking about how personally committed he was to its approval and how he considered the vote one of the most important foreign policy votes of his entire career. He then gave arguments as to the necessity of the sale. The first was that the sale

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<sup>104</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 27). Reagan Presses Last-Ditch Blitz On AWACS Sale. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147294333?accountid=14766>

<sup>105</sup> Goshko

<sup>106</sup> Mohr, Charles. (1981, Oct 28). 9 MORE SENATORS SUPPORT PRESIDENT ON SALE OF AWACS. *New York Times* (1923-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121828542?accountid=14766>

<sup>107</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 28). President Scores Dramatic Gain in Fight on AWACS. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147254498?accountid=14766>

was necessary for the US to have influence in the region. The second was about the necessity of the president to be able to conduct effective foreign policy. The third argument was that the administration had delayed the deal for congressional input and the Saudis had demonstrated their intentions for responsible use of the AWACS. Lastly, the Majority Leader used his time to talk about Saudi help on the peace process and the lack of harm to Israel's security.

This litany of argumentation, however, was a mere formality. By the day of the vote, according to some reports the administration was so certain of legislative victory that celebration at the White House and State Department were being planned 24 hours before the vote. Senator Baker was described as "frankly optimistic" and believed that the sale would be passed.<sup>108</sup> As a result, the debate on the Senate floor was "largely a lifeless affair" with a few dramatic moments as Senator Cohen (R-ME) previously an opponent of the sale used his speech to attack the Saudi's and Reagan's policies, before explaining why he would support the sale.<sup>109</sup> When the resolution of disapproval went up for a vote, the numbers had changed in favor of the deal with 52 against it and 48 for it. Four previously opposed senators, Cohen, Slade Gorton (R-WA), Mark Andrews (R-ND) and Edward Zorinsky (R-OR), voted against the resolution. Gorton among other senators specifically cited Reagan's hitherto secret letter as major reasons why they turned to support the president. The letter was only sent to the Senate yesterday because it had been kept incomplete so that it could be tailored to meet the individual senators concerns. Reagan gave his personal guarantee that the five AWACS planes would not be delivered to Saudi Arabia until the conditions in the letter were met.

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<sup>108</sup> Shribman, David. (1981, Oct 29). Last Scene of the Drama: A Foregone Conclusion. *New York Times* (1923-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121490007?accountid=14766>

<sup>109</sup> Goshko, John M. (1981, Oct 29). Vote of 52 to 48 Is Major Victory. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147245256?accountid=14766>



The four senators who switched gave the administration the essential push it needed to meet and subsequently pass the threshold necessary to defeat the resolution and go through with the sale.<sup>110</sup> Regarding his win in the Senate, Reagan said the legislative body's actions represented "the upper chamber at its best."<sup>111</sup> After a difficult almost yearlong fight, Baker and Reagan came out on top. The United States would sell Saudi Arabia the \$8.5 billion dollar AWACS package.

## Conclusion

The October vote in the Senate was seen as major victory for President Reagan. The stakes of the AWACS vote were high, with politicians and pundits alike agreeing that the administration had a lot riding on the vote. Failure for Mr. Reagan on the AWACS would "have been a disastrous foreign policy crash,"<sup>112</sup> which "would have damaged his standing in Congress and perhaps in the country."<sup>113</sup> Saudi Arabia would have seen the United States as an unreliable partner, and the US-Saudi relationship could have been irrevocably damaged. In 1981 over the course of the AWACS debate, Ronald Reagan's presidency was still in its infancy and failure in the AWACS vote would have altered the future course of his administration. The implications of this are evident.

The fact that these negative outcomes did not come to pass is due in no small part to the tireless efforts of Senator Howard Baker Jr. on behalf of the sale. By working closely with the Saudis, devising strategies with the president, working closely with Congress and assisting

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<sup>110</sup> Goshko

<sup>111</sup> Goshko

<sup>112</sup> It Flies. (1981, Nov 01). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/121424874?accountid=14766>

<sup>113</sup> Broder, David S. (1981, Oct 29). President Receives Political Boost. *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147151939?accountid=14766>

Reagan in his lobbying effort he was able to see the arms deal through. It was an uphill battle from the start with Baker only having 13 committed votes at one point, but through his hard work and diligence he was able to see that number increased substantially much to the benefit of the president and the US-Saudi relationship.

When one looks back at the history of US-Saudi relations, focus is typically placed on the actions of the presidents and kings, along with historical events. The AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia was one of those defining historical moments. Unfortunately, in the narrative of the AWACS arms sale, Howard Baker's role is often lost. Emphasis is regularly placed on the Israel lobby, the strong opposition of Senators like Edward Kennedy and Bob Packwood, and Ronald Reagan's intense lobbying blitz. In Nicholas Laham's seminal work on the AWACS arms deal, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia*, Senator Howard Baker's name cannot even be found in the index. Even the well-known user contribution-based online encyclopedia site Wikipedia does not mention Howard Baker in its "US/Saudi AWACS Sale" page.

Senator Howard Baker was a unique breed of legislator whose contribution to the close partnership between the Saudis and the Americans cannot be understated. With the passage of the AWACS deal in 1981, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia only grew stronger and has since outlived the Cold War realities that shaped it. Saudi Arabia's role in US foreign policy is a nonpartisan reality, and the fact that the more recent 2010 arms deal occurred under the auspices of a Democratic president with very little congressional protest is a testament to Senator Howard Baker's legacy as a bipartisan foreign policy actor. Howard Baker was pivotal in the AWACS arms deal, and this ultimately makes him a major, if underappreciated, figure in the history of the United States' strategic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.